

UNDER DEVELOPMENT

Letting rip

Never one to shy away from confronting the IT issues that matter, David Robinson lowers the tone by asking the all-important question: what is a digital fart?

I'll start by apologising for the question I'm about to ask. I don't mean to be gratuitously offensive, but what I want to know is this: is it possible to do a digital fart? My reason for asking is that it's the only explanation for my position on a flight back from Baton Rouge via the horror that is Atlanta airport.

Prior to leaving, I checked my seat online for the Atlanta-to-Manchester leg to find that not only was the flight chock-a-block, but also that I had a seat with an F on it, which puts it slap in the middle of the plane. The last time this happened I had to spend nine miserable hours next to a noisy sprog with smelly feet.

So, imagine my surprise on boarding to find that I had the whole middle row to myself. It was just as if I'd done a digital doily (rhyming slang, as in D'Oyly Carte) while confirming the seat on the net and all the others in the row had got wind of it (sorry) and decided to switch to other flights. But I can honestly claim complete innocence in this respect.

MAGIC NUMBERS

Internet search engines contain very few references to this subject. Google's only decent effort is a guy who goes by the moniker Digital Fart on a discussion group about the C# computer language, while Yahoo! points to a discussion thread in Yahoo! Answers on what one might smell like. Don't people have anything better to do? Apparently the answer is 1101 1110 1010 1101 1011 1110 1110 1111, which looks like a set of binary numbers.

At first I thought it would be simple to decode this but the numbers come out as 13 14 10 13 11 14 14 15, so don't make up an ASCII character string that means anything to me. If it were to translate 'cabbage', say, then the first number would have to be 67, or 10000111 in binary. ASCII codes this low are control characters, usually to do with sending instructions to printers or old-fashioned serial terminals. Even the names of the characters don't mean anything. For example, 14 is Shift IN



and 15 Shift OUT. Trying that gets you CRSILFCRVISISISO, which looks meaningless. The first person to email me with a workable solution to what it says gets a prize – see www.drsaxon.co.uk for a list from which to choose.

INDECISION TIME

Anyway, having the row to myself meant that I got a decent kip on the plane and arrived back in the office refreshed and raring to go. Not that it mattered much. My six stalled projects were still in stasis. Heavens above! Can't anyone make a decision in fewer than six months? Two were EDI projects waiting for input from cust2mers, one was still waiting for a grant approval and the other three the customers couldn't decide which of the key options they wanted to implement. But if Blakey's kids weren't going to be doing an impression of Tiny Tim come Christmas Day, I needed to get on my bike and sell something.

The first step to that is updating our company brochure, a sort of who-are-we-and-what-we-can-do-for-you-type of thing, plus some additional product brochures. I'm using Serif's PagePlus version 11. Instead of the usual boring A4 sheet I've opted for a double-sided, A4 landscape sheet, with three vertical pages per side in a sort of gatefold format. Lots of programs would

make this really difficult to do, but PagePlus has a template that makes it simple.

Creating your own short-run printed material has never been easier, especially if you have a colour laser printer, but most of us need some design advice to prevent the result looking like a dog's breakfast. So as creative aids I've been looking at Roger C Parker's *Looking Good In Print* (ISBN 193309706X) and *Before and After Graphics for Business* (ISBN 0321334159, both available from www.compmen.co.uk). These are both invaluable if you want to add a bit of extra flair and avoid making classic mistakes.

RUN FOR THE MONEY

The sleep on the plane was also useful as the following Sunday I was entered to run in the Abbey Dash, a 10K road race in Leeds organised by Help The Aged. My business partner and son-in-law Alan was also running; he said I was doing it to help myself. It's a big race with around 5,000 entrants and needs a lot of organisation, not least because it's a chipped race, which means that runners get a transponder the size of a half-crown (I really am showing my age) that you tie on their shoe. A computer then logs you across the start and finish lines so you get an accurate

race time, even if you take five minutes to get over the start line because it's so crowded.

It's a good system, provided you have the race numbers, chip IDs and competitors' names properly matched, that is. The envelope that arrived with my race number and chip was addressed to a Mr I Dunn, at my address. Alan's was addressed to R Jordan. When I phoned Help The Aged to let them know, it turned out that every entrant had the same problem.

How could that happen? Well, try this. Open Excel and in column A type in four names in rows 1 to 4 (for example, Smith, Jones, Adams and Mason). Then in column B type in Smith's House, Jones's House and so on. Highlight column A, select Data, Sort from the menu and bingo, Adams now lives in Smith's house and Mason in Adams' house. My copy of Excel does warn that doing this will only re-arrange column A, but overriding the warning is easy and I don't know if all versions issue the warning or if it can be turned off. And doing this is untraceable, so there's no obvious sign that anything is wrong. If you have 5,000 real names and addresses, knowing that the result is an expensive mess isn't as easy to spot as knowing that Adams should be in Adams' house as in the example here.

I can't say for sure that this is what happened, but it has to be a prime suspect. You can imagine some well-meaning soul thinking it would be easier to handle the list if it were in surname order but forgetting that you need to include all the columns in the selection. Even worse, if you realise what you've done only after saving the result there's no easy way back to the data you started with. Spreadsheets have a seductive attraction in that they're easy to use, but sadly they're also very easy to abuse without realising it. If you must use them, do so with care. **CS**

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